

ALTITUDE AS ATTITUDE
IN TWO NOVELS OF HAWTHORNE

by

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B. A., Azusa Pacific College, 1959

A MASTER'S REPORT

submitted in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree

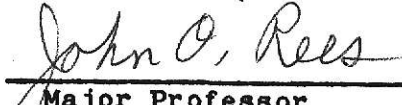
MASTER OF ARTS

Department of English

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

1973

Approved by:


Major Professor

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The great fiction writer of the American Renaissance, Nathaniel Hawthorne, has been studied and restudied in many different aspects. Both his art and his ideas have been dealt with by countless scholars. One aspect of his art, however, which has had little treatment, is the vertical strata in which he places many of his characters. For example, Hawthorne uses Donatello's tower in The Marble Faun to comment in several ways on this young man's ability or inability to adapt to life as his fellow mortals do. The same can be said of Coverdale's hermitage in the pine tree in The Blithedale Romance, Clifford's seat by the arched upper window of The House of The Seven Gables, and Dimmesdale's raised pulpit in The Scarlet Letter. On the opposite end of the spectrum, Hawthorne employs images of depth or low places. His implication seems to be that depth, like height, can symbolize abnormality in the characters involved--for example, in the evil monk who rises out of the catacombs of Rome in The Marble Faun, and in Roger Chillingworth of The Scarlet Letter as he stands in the dust and dirt of the marketplace, stooping slightly from a deformity.

This study will examine the artistic use of elevation as a significant and symbolic factor in two Hawthorne novels, The Scarlet Letter and The Marble Faun. His short sketch, "Sights From A Steeple," also shows us the author's unusual fascination with the subject of elevation or altitude. Although many of his other writings also foreshadow his treatment of this subject in the two novels, this early sketch (1831) is in some ways more prophetic than the rest.

I

The narrator of "Sights From A Steeple" has climbed to the top of a village church, to the level of its steeple, to contemplate various scenes from that altitude: "In three parts of the visible circle, whose center is this spire, I discern cultivated fields, villages, white country seats, the waving lines of rivulets. . . . On the fourth side is the sea, stretching away towards a viewless boundary. . . . On the verge of the harbor, formed by its extremity, is a town; and over it am I, a watchman, all-heeding and unheeded."¹

The narrator's thoughts wander almost aimlessly throughout the sketch, but some significant points can be made from what he says. First of all, he is not sure that the climb is worth the effort: "So! I have climbed high, and my reward is small. Here I stand, with wearied knees, earth, indeed, at a dizzy depth below, but heaven far, far beyond me still" (141). Secondly, this conflict over the value of the climb is intimated in

this passage: "The most desirable mode of existence might be that of a spiritualized Paul Pry, hovering invisible round man and woman, witnessing their deeds . . . and retaining no emotion peculiar to himself" (142). The implications are not only that he might be a fool, but also that he pries into people's business where he has no right to go, and perhaps even that he climbs to a height where he has no right to be--looking down upon the rest of humanity. The narrator's desire for a fresh perspective, however, seems honest enough--even if it is only for the moment. He is keenly aware of the folly of climbing too high above his fellow mortals: "O that I could soar up into the very zenith, where man never breathed . . . And yet I shiver at that cold and solitary thought" (141).

The moment of truth for the narrator in this sketch comes when the thunderstorm, which has been gathering through much of the story, finally hits in full force: "I love not my station here aloft, in the midst of the tumult which I am powerless to direct or quell . . . I will descend" (147). The storm serves to remind him of his own smallness, his own humanity--his subordinate place on the vertical scale--and thus prepares us for the final scene of the sketch.

In this final scene, we see that a middle ground between heaven and earth has served to give the narrator his most beneficial and insightful vantage point. He seems to go through a resolution of his own conflict over the value of the climb, in the last paragraph of the sketch: "Yet let me give another

glance to the sea . . . and let me look once more at the green plain. . . . A little speck of azure has widened in the western heavens . . . and on yonder darkest cloud, borne like hallowed hopes . . . brightens forth the rainbow!" (147). Since his last look is one of hopefulness, the climb has been worthwhile-- though he had doubted at the very beginning that it could be. The risks and limitations of climbing too high have been dutifully expressed, but the value has more than offset them in the end. The narrator has not allowed himself to become earth-bound and thereby trapped by the shortsightedness of his fellows; nor has he allowed himself to become estranged from them by flights into fantasy, however tempting. His efforts to stay between the low and the high extremes speaks for his struggle to maintain an appropriate sense of reality.

II

This same concern with high and low extremes is marked in The Scarlet Letter. The extreme of the high is certainly seen in the lofty stance of Governor Bellingham, Reverend Wilson, and the rest of the town's Puritan leadership. Not only are they seen literally above the crowd on balconies and pedestals; their self-evaluation is also that of superiority. Added to this group, not completely by his own choice but rather by his own weakness and cowardice, is the Reverend Arthur Dimmesdale. He is the character who undoubtedly feels the tension between heaven and earth more keenly and painfully than any other char-

acter in the novel.

The extreme of the low is seen most readily in the mass of common humanity that gathers about the foot of the scaffold or shares in the petty gossip of the dusty marketplace. Into this mass enters the earth-bent Roger Chillingworth, a serpent-like human who cannot see higher than his own perverted lust for revenge. It is fitting that he should first appear down at the edge of the crowd,² and that he should, likewise, make his last retreat from the reader's vision sinking downward "like an uprooted weed that lies wilting in the sun" (260).

Surprisingly, the middle ground between the two extremes, which might be called the too heavenly and the too earthly, is found on the one most-shunned spot in all of the stage scenery of this dramatic story--the scaffold of the pillory, the place of confession and public punishment. This is Hester's familiar territory. Of the three adult characters central to the story, she is the one who survives the tragedy to face a long and fruitful life. Her very survival seems to indicate the author's acceptance of her middle-point stance. Her lover, Arthur Dimmesdale, is eventually brought down from his superior position and his life is tragically ended; nevertheless, it is the scaffold as a symbol of truthfulness that lets him win his salvation.

A more detailed examination of Hawthorne's own comments in The Scarlet Letter will reveal how these three vertical positions establish character attitudes in the novel. The superior position is seen clearly in the scene of Hester's first ordeal of

public punishment. While the crowds are looking up at her, the town leaders are looking down from a position high above the entire scene: we are made to notice "the solemn presence of men no less dignified than the Governor, and several of his counselors, a judge, a general, and the ministers of the town; all of whom sat or stood in a balcony of the meeting house, looking down upon the platform" (56). As he ends a lengthy description of this same balcony and its occupants, these superior and austere judges, Hawthorne turns with a tone of gentle sympathy toward the unfortunate Hester at this moment of her humiliation: "They were, doubtless, good men, just, and sage. But, out of the whole human family, it would not have been easy to select the same number of wise and virtuous persons, who should less be capable of sitting in judgment on an erring woman's heart, and disentangling its mesh of good and evil, than the sages of rigid aspect towards whom Hester Prynne now turned her face. . . . as she lifted her eyes towards the balcony, the unhappy woman grew pale and trembled" (64-65).

The literal and figurative superiority of these "sages" is stressed further in "The Governor's Hall." The "narrow tower" on either side of Governor Bellingham's front door, the "lofty hall," the "ponderous chairs," and the high window that looks down upon the garden walk all connote an attitude that "looks down upon" the rest of humanity.

Although Dimmesdale's apartment, as seen in the chapter "The Leech and His Patient," is up a stairway and above the level

of the street, his view out of the window is characteristically different from that of the Governor's luxurious gardens. Dimmesdale's upstairs window overlooks a graveyard. This setting is typical of the young minister's preoccupation with death and sin, and though it does not have the overbearing aspect of Governor Bellingham's position, it nonetheless puts him on an unhealthy level above and out of reach of the rest of humanity.

As in the scene at the pillory, the scene at Dimmesdale's dwelling in "The Leech and His Patient" affords the reader two opposite viewpoints. First he is in the mind of the minister as he looks down upon the graveyard and sees Hester and her child approaching along the path (133). Then the reader is taken into the mind of Hester as she "involuntarily looked up" to see Dimmesdale standing in the window (134). The vertical distance between their positions is subtly but unmistakably reinforced in the reader's mind in these scenes.

Dimmesdale, however, is not as high on the vertical scale as he might be. He admires other ministers who have scaled the heights, but knows he cannot join them: "Their voices came down, afar and indistinctly, from the upper heights where they habitually dwelt . . . To their high mountain-peaks of faith and sanctity he would have climbed, had not the tendency been thwarted by the burden . . . beneath which it was his doom to totter. It kept him down, on a level with the lowest; him, the man of ethereal attributes, whose voice the angels might else have listened to and answered! But this very burden it was,

that gave him sympathies so intimate with the sinful brotherhood of mankind" (142). The point is made, when the author states that "he stole softly down the staircase" on his way to the pillory, that Dimmesdale is aware that his only salvation lies in a descent to honesty and open confession (146).

The minister's upstairs room is not the only reminder of his position, for his pulpit likewise constantly serves to torture him with the idea of pseudo-superiority: "'And as for the people's reverence, would that it were turned to scorn and hatred! Canst thou deem it, Hester, a consolation, that I must stand up in my pulpit, and meet so many eyes turned upward to my face, as if the light of heaven were beaming from it . . . and then look inward, and discern the black reality of what they idolize?'" (191).

In spite of Dimmesdale's awareness of what he should do, he continues to follow the lofty path set out for him by his peers and the townspeople. This serves to only increase the tension within him. Twice, toward the end of the novel, the striking contrast between his position and Hester's is poignantly brought out:

While Hester stood in that magic circle of ignominy, where the cunning cruelty of her sentence seemed to have fixed her forever, the admirable preacher was looking down from the sacred pulpit upon an audience, whose very inmost spirits had yielded to his control. The sainted minister in the church! The woman of the scarlet letter in the marketplace! What imagination would have been

irreverent enough to surmise that the same scorching stigma was on them both? (246-247)

Again, Hawthorne uses the device of altitude to reinforce the distance between the proud preacher and the woman of sin. Perhaps the best example of this device is found in the following scene, where Dimmesdale has just completed his famed Election Sermon:

He stood, at this moment, on the very proudest eminence of superiority, to which the gifts of intellect, rich lore, prevailing eloquence, and a reputation of whitest sanctity, could exalt a clergyman in New England's earliest days, when the professional character was of itself a lofty pedestal. Such was the position which the minister occupied, as he bowed his head forward on the cushions of the pulpit, at the close of his Election Sermon. Meanwhile, Hester Prynne was standing beside the scaffold of the pillory, with the scarlet letter still burning on her breast! (249-250)

In contrast to Dimmesdale's situation, however, what we might call "too low" a viewpoint is also harmful. For example, most of the women surrounding the door of the prison, waiting for Hester to emerge, exhibit an earthy crudeness and lack of sensitivity: Hawthorne describes "a hard-featured dame of fifty" who sneeringly says to her friends, "'If the hussy stood up for judgment before us five . . . would she come off with such a sentence as the worshipful magistrates have awarded?'" (51). "A third autumnal matron" follows: "'At the very least, they should have put the brand of a hot iron on Hester Prynne's forehead'" (51). And another: "'What do we talk of marks and brands,

whether on the bodice of her gown, or the flesh of her forehead?' cried another female, the ugliest as well as the most pitiless of these self-constituted judges. 'This woman has brought shame upon us all, and ought to die'" (51). Perhaps their feelings of social inferiority and their physical unattractiveness cause them to resent having to "look up to" her at all, even in her status as a convicted adulteress; they would rather see her dead and forgotten.

The crowd which stands down in the dusty street of Boston, witnessing Hester's humiliation, is comprised of many different kinds of people: these angered and venomous women, schoolboys out for a holiday making sport of the whole situation, curious men, and, worst of all, the long-estranged husband of this now infamous woman. As has been suggested, it is fitting that Roger Chillingworth should emerge from the crowd of unsympathetic people surrounding the pillory on that day.

It is also characteristic that even at the beginning, Chillingworth has a stooping, bent-down appearance, which becomes more marked as the novel progresses; we read in this first scene that he is "slightly deformed, with the left shoulder a trifle higher than the right" (58). This physical deformity seems an appropriate symbol of his increasing baseness of character. Throughout the story Hester gradually rises in human understanding while Chillingworth sinks in the opposite direction: "She had climbed her way [during the seven years since her sentence] : . . to a higher point. The old man, on the other hand, had brought

himself nearer to her level, or perhaps below it, by the revenge which he had stooped for" (167). After these seven years of vengeance he is described thus: "His gray beard almost touched the ground, as he crept onward" (175).

The character of Chillingworth is presented as becoming even infernal. When he eventually discovers beyond any of his doubts that Dimmesdale is Hester's guilty lover, his response is as follows: "But with what a wild look of wonder, joy, and horror! With what a ghastly rapture . . . Had a man seen old Roger Chillingworth, at that moment of his ecstasy, he would have had no need to ask how Satan comports himself, when a precious human soul is lost to heaven, and won into his kingdom" (138). Toward the end of the story, when Chillingworth fears he will lose his victim, Hawthorne repeats this satanic parallel--this time using vertical terms appropriate to the scene: "At this instant old Roger Chillingworth thrust himself through the crowd,-- or, perhaps, so dark, disturbed, and evil was his look, he rose up out of some nether region, -- to snatch back his victim from what he sought to do!" (252). Hawthorne stresses altitude for more than one purpose here. Chillingworth is first seen coming through the crowd at the base level of society; but more damning yet is the imaginative picture of his rising from hell's regions beneath. His only desire is to prevent Dimmesdale from confessing his sin on the platform of the pillory--thereby receiving salvation. In the context of Puritan theology, this motive is the devil's work; it is certainly not coincident-

al, then, that Chillingworth would almost appear to be rising out of the lower regions of earth.

The vertical position which Hawthorne evidently identifies most strongly with is that of the "middle ground." In this particular novel, the platform of the pillory stands out as the one central place where truth prevails. It is erected "beneath the eaves" of Boston's church and is far below the elevated balcony of the meeting house, yet it is several steps above the level of the street. There is an interesting connotation of physical and perhaps moral strength in Hawthorne's choice of words to describe the actual height of the platform, "about the height of a man's shoulders above the street" (56).

In this Puritan community the act of standing up to public disgrace demands all of Hester's strength; her ordeal is not just difficult but excruciating. The reader's sympathy for this woman is aroused in the opening scene at the pillory:

" . . . under the leaden infliction which it was her doom to endure, she felt, at moments, as if she must needs shriek out with the full power of her lungs, and cast herself from the scaffold down upon the ground, or else go mad at once" (57).

However, Hester is much better off than Dimmesdale in the long view of things because she stands her ground in open honesty. As the minister himself states in this very scene, in his staged attempt to persuade her to reveal her lover's name: " . . . believe me, Hester, though he were to step down from a high place, and stand there beside thee, on thy pedestal of shame,

yet better were it so, than to hide a guilty heart through life" (67).

If the scaffold stands out as a symbol of truthfulness, part of the visual description indicates that its slight elevation is an essential element in presenting that truth: " . . . the scaffold of the pillory was a point of view that revealed to Hester Prynne the entire track along which she had been treading, since her happy infancy. Standing on that miserable eminence, she saw . . . " (58). There follows a lengthy description of all the things Hester "saw" from the vantage point of that scaffold; these include her past life as well as her present predicament and reasons for her being there.

The scaffold as "a point of view" is re-emphasized toward the end of the story when Hester realizes more fully where these years of honest suffering have brought her:

During all this time Hester stood, statue-like, at the foot of the scaffold. If the minister's voice had not kept her there, there would nevertheless have been an inevitable magnetism in that spot, whence she dated the first hour of her life of ignominy. There was a sense within her,--too ill-defined to be made a thought, but weighing heavily on her mind,--that her whole orb of life, both before and after, was connected with this spot, as with the one point that gave it unity. (244)

That unity has been due only to her standing firm atop that vantage point and watching the entire parade of her life march before her vision, as was expressed in the opening scene at the pillory.

While the scaffold is a relatively low spot on the scale, it is also a "pedestal." Many references to this place of punishment, in The Scarlet Letter, call it a "pedestal of shame" (67, 69, 118). Like "miserable eminence" (58), this is a paradox; pedestals are ordinarily thought to mean places that hold high for public view some saint or hero in the form of a statue. Hester is raised high, not for honor or fame, but rather for infamy. In fact, Chillingworth takes note of this paradox, in words that present an interesting contrast of heights and depths: "'Hester,' said he, 'I ask not wherefore, nor how, thou hast fallen into the pit, or say rather, thou hast ascended to the pedestal of infamy, on which I found thee'" (73-74). The scaffold's paradoxical significance is emphasized further in the chapter entitled "The Minister's Vigil." While Dimmesdale must come down his own stairs to go to the scaffold in hopes of achieving a moment's peace, he must also climb once he has arrived at that significant spot. "The same platform or scaffold, black and weather-stained with the storm or sunshine of seven long years, and foot-worn, too, with the tread of many culprits who had since ascended it, remained standing beneath the balcony of the meeting-house. The minister went up the steps" (147).

What of Dimmesdale and his tragic superiority? He recognizes, too late to make the necessary adjustments to live happily on this earth, that his only salvation will come from an open confession of the truth. As is obvious by now, the one place where he can achieve this sense of release through honesty is on

the scaffold of the pillory. This is a difficult, indeed fatal, decision for the famed minister to make. In the midst of the crowd that has just applauded him after his greatest sermon, he takes this painful action. For this he needs Hester's strength: "'Come, Hester, come! Support me up yonder scaffold!'" . . . They beheld the minister, leaning on Hester's shoulder and supported by her arm around him, approach the scaffold, and ascend its steps" (253). This ascent, which Dimmesdale in his dying words calls "triumphant ignominy," brings him successfully to the necessary half-way point between opposite extremes. It is the reconciliation of the conflict between high and low, the resolution of the paradox, or to put it in Blakean terms, "the marriage of heaven and hell." One cannot help but draw a parallel, also, to Christ's being "lifted up" in his moment of greatest humiliation--suspended between heaven and earth, in order to fulfill his commitment to truth.

Perhaps no further comment is necessary beyond the words of old Roger Chillingworth as he witnesses the confession of the minister:

"Hadst thou sought the whole earth over," said he, looking darkly at the clergyman, "there was no one place so secret,-- no high place nor lowly place, where thou couldst have escaped me,-- save on this very scaffold!" (253)

III

The device of altitude plays an important part again in The Marble Faun, but a somewhat different one. This difference from The Scarlet Letter lies mainly, I believe, in what the author considers the midway point of resolution. Whereas the level of greatest moral strength and spiritual harmony appears to be the pillory in The Scarlet Letter, it is the street level in The Marble Faun. As we have seen, the extremes noted in the former are upstairs balcony versus street level--with the pillory as mid-point; the extremes noted in the latter are the summits of mountains and towers versus deep underground caverns--with the street as mid-point. As the novel progresses, moreover, Hawthorne repeatedly calls our attention to where each of the characters currently stands on this vertical scale, as even a short selection of illustrations will show.

Hilda's literal and figurative elevation is established very early in the story, beginning with a description of the tower in which she lives: "At one of the angles of the battlements stood a shrine of the Virgin, such as we see everywhere at the street-corners of Rome, but seldom or never, except in this solitary instance, at a height above the ordinary level of men's views and aspirations."³ It is Hilda's particular responsibility to trim the lamp at this shrine. "The confraternity of artists called Hilda the Dove, and recognized her aerial apartment as the Dovecote" (56). Kenyon tells her, "'It soothes me inexpressibly to think of you in your tower, with the white

doves and white thoughts for your companions, so high above us all'" (112). Again, he explains to Miriam: "'Hilda does not dwell in our mortal atmosphere; and gentle and soft as she appears, it will be as difficult to win her heart as to entice down a white bird from its sunny freedom in the sky'" (121).

Hilda's relationship to Kenyon is described mainly in these vertical terms, as the following scene illustrates:

Bidding the sculptor farewell, Hilda climbed her tower, and came forth upon its summit to trim the Virgin's lamp. . . . Turning her eyes down into the dusky street which she had just quitted, Hilda saw the sculptor still there, and waved her hand to him.

"How sad and dim he looks, down there in that dreary street!" she said to herself.

"How like a spirit she looks, aloft there, with the evening glory round her head, and those winged creatures claiming her as akin to them!" thought Kenyon, on his part. "How far above me--how unattainable! Ah, if I could lift myself to her region! Or--if it be not sin to wish it--would that I might draw her down to an earthly fireside!" (372)

Despite his self-abasement toward her here, even Kenyon at times appears to reflect a certain distaste toward such superiority as Hilda exhibits. He recognizes that it has "unworldly and impracticable" aspects, and gently but clearly points out her cold intransigence towards the human failings of Donatello and Miriam: "'I always felt you, my dear friend, a terribly severe judge, and have been perplexed to conceive how such tender sympathy could coexist with the remorselessness of a steel

blade. You need no mercy, and therefore know not how to show any'" (384). The last place we see Hilda in this story is on top of St. Peter's cathedral, in the "Postscript." She is standing with "the Author" and Kenyon, discussing from a position "remote in the upper air . . . the secrets which it would be perilous even to whisper on lower earth" (464). Her superiority, her moral loftiness, has been threatened by her witnessing the murder; but finally it has survived intact throughout all the events and struggles of the story. I am convinced, however, after taking a view of the other characters, that the author does not finally endorse this type of superiority.

Donatello, too, is associated with an upper, "airy region," but only at the very beginning of the story, before his emergence into intelligent and sensible manhood. At this point he is little more than a plaything for the amusement of his more intellectual friends: "The resemblance between the marble Faun and their living companion had made a deep, half-serious, half-mirthful impression on these three friends, and had taken them into a certain airy region, lifting up, as it is so pleasant to feel them lifted, their heavy earthly feet from the actual soil of life" (16). The imagery of elevation here is obviously intended to symbolize escape.

Hawthorne depicts Donatello in several different scenes gamboling merrily about as a creature of air. "The light foot of Donatello" is seen springing up the stairway that leads to Miriam's studio (39). Again in the Villa Borghese this airiness

is described, as he awaits a meeting with Miriam: "He leapt up to catch the overhanging bough of an ilex, and swinging himself by it, alighted far onward, as if he had flown thither through the air. . . . At last, deeming it full time for Miriam to keep her tryst, he climbed to the tiptop of the tallest tree, and thence looked about him, swaying to and fro in the gentle breeze, which was like the respiration of that great leafy, living thing. Donatello saw beneath him the whole circuit of the enchanted ground" (74-75). Even in this early, carefree scene, however, Donatello's incipient ties to earthly things contrast him with Hilda. As he waits for Miriam, "in order to bring himself closer to the genial earth, with which his kindred instincts linked him so strongly, he threw himself at full length on the turf, and pressed down his lips, kissing the violets and daisies, which kissed him back again, though shyly, in their maiden fashion" (74). Donatello's airy vantage point thus has a more natural element than Hilda's tower shrine--it keeps him closer to the earth, figuratively as well as literally. Miriam's appraisal of his position is interestingly worded, after Donatello drops out of the tree to suddenly appear at her side: "'I hardly know,' said she, smiling, 'whether you have sprouted out of the earth, or fallen from the clouds'" (76).

The young "faun" does not remain this dancing symbol of airiness for long, moreover. After the murder of the Capuchin monk, Donatello's feelings regarding height undergo a drastic change. The very tower in which he spent so many happy hours

playing as a child now becomes what Hawthorne calls a "forlorn elevation," a symbol of Donatello's new isolation and fear.

"I thank my forefathers for building it so high. I like the windy summit better than the world below, and spend much of my time there nowadays" (217). Characteristic of the change is his refusal to come down and join in the vintage celebration as he had always done before: "There were sometimes dances by moonlight on the lawn, but never since he came from Rome did Donatello's presence deepen the blushes of the pretty contadinæ, or his footsteps weary out the most agile partner or competitor, as once it was sure to do. . . . a cloud seemed to hang over these once Arcadian precincts, and to be darkest around the summit of the tower where Donatello was wont to sit and brood" (241). Donatello feels vertigo as well as loneliness when he looks over the battlements of his tower. Painfully he recalls to Kenyon the horrible sight and sound of a man falling over a precipice. His guilty memories of hurling the monk to his death in this way elicit this outcry: "'I fain would fling myself down for the very dread of it, that I might endure it once for all, and dream of it no more!'" (261).

The contrast between Donatello's original enjoyment of heights and his attitude at this point is striking. Even Kenyon cannot get him out into the countryside now, to ease his despair:

"The sky itself is an old roof," answered the Count
 [Donatello] , "and, no doubt, the sins of mankind have

made it gloomier than it used to be."

"Oh, my poor Faun," thought Kenyon to himself,

"How art thou changed!" (302)

As we will see, from this point on to the conclusion, the change within Donatello continues even further, as he descends from the heights.

Kenyon's original elevation is similar to Hilda's, but the reader sees him trying manfully to face the realities of life on ground level through much of the story. Hilda's fascination for him wins out finally, however, and we see these two together, as the novel ends, "remote in the upper air" (464).

His upstairs studio illustrates something of Kenyon's feelings of superiority at the beginning of the story. When Miriam comes with a burdened heart to confide in him, he meets her with a cool reserve. Her descent which follows emphasizes for us the contrast between Kenyon's detachment in his upstairs studio and Miriam's ordeal below:

After Kenyon had closed the door, she went wearily down the staircase, but paused midway, as if debating with herself whether to return. . . .

She ascended two or three of the stairs, but again paused, murmured to herself, and shook her head. . . .

She went down the stairs, and found her Shadow waiting for her in the street. (130)

Here Kenyon's superior position implies that he is safely isolated from the rest of the world. So he will not bring himself to listen to whatever Miriam has to confess. At other times,

however, as in the scene where he is admiring the grandeur of the earth from the summit of Donatello's tower, his interest in heights seems to be more a positive declaration of faith. He is a character caught in a conflict--often torn between his high idealism and his wish to live with the reality of life. Even after his ecstatic enjoyment of the view from Donatello's tower, Kenyon recognizes his need to return closer to the ordinary level of earth: "They stood awhile, contemplating the scene; but, as inevitably happens after a spiritual flight, it was not long before the sculptor felt his wings flagging in the rarity of the upper atmosphere. He was glad to let himself quietly downward out of the mid-sky, as it were, and alight on the solid platform of the battlemented tower" (259).

After this scene the reader finds Kenyon spending more and more of his time at ground level. First, he descends from the tower to participate in the vintage celebration, and from this point on he enjoys watching the country folk with their healthy mixture of work and play. He also becomes involved now in the intense suffering of Miriam and Donatello. He walks with Donatello over the Italian countryside, up and down hills and valleys, and into crowded villages--all in an effort to understand and help him. Later, when he discovers his own Hilda is lost, he spends a great deal of time searching for her through the Roman streets.

Through this entire period, however, we still find Kenyon clinging to his ideal of Hilda; this idealism is, again, described

in terms of height: "And, even while he stood gazing, as a mariner at the star in which he put his trust, the light quivered, sank, gleamed up again, and finally went out, leaving the battlements of Hilda's tower in utter darkness" (398). And later: "The days wore away, and still there were no tidings of the lost one . . . no star of hope . . . in heaven itself!" (408). The star analogy is only one analogy of height used to indicate Kenyon's search for his ideal here. Many pages are devoted also to Kenyon's ascent up Hilda's stairs in hopes of finding her. His descent after finding her apartment empty coincides with all his feelings of futility and defeat (401-407).

After he and Hilda are reunited, Kenyon shares some new thoughts with her--reflecting, I believe, not only the education of Donatello, but something of his own as well: "'Here comes my perplexity,' continued Kenyon. 'Sin has educated Donatello, and elevated him. Is sin, then--which we deem such a dreadful blackness in the universe--is it, like sorrow, merely an element of human education, through which we struggle to a higher and purer state than we could otherwise have attained? Did Adam fall, that we might ultimately rise to a far loftier paradise than his?'" (460). When Hilda totally rejects this possibility, Kenyon is quick to reject it, too. Whatever the middle ground period has taught him, he is immediately willing to forget it now--preferring to follow Hilda's star of idealism: "'Forgive me, Hilda!' exclaimed the sculptor, startled by her

agitation. 'I never did believe it! But the mind wanders wild and wide; and, so lonely as I live and work, I have neither pole star above nor light of cottage windows here below to bring me home. Were you my guide . . . all would go well. Oh, Hilda, guide me home!'" (460-461).

The depths, as extreme opposites to the heights, in The Marble Faun are likewise indicative of certain attitudes-- chiefly involving morbidity, suppressed guilt, and despair. The character whom we associate most with these attitudes is, of course, the Capuchin monk who emerges from the underground Catacombs. Our first view of the monk, who is also identified as Miriam's "model" in the opening pages, is a characteristically gloomy one; Hawthorne describes him as "the Spectre of the Catacomb . . . hiding himself in sepulchral gloom, and mourning over his lost life of woods and streams" (30). Moreover, this "Man-Demon" seems to seek not only his own misery but that of whomever he can lure satanically into the depths along with him:

Thenceforth, this heathen Memmius has haunted the wide and dreary precincts of the catacomb, seeking, as some say, to beguile new victims into his own misery; . . . Should his wiles and entreaties take effect, however, the Man-Demon would remain only a little while above ground. He would gratify his fiendish malignity by perpetrating signal mischief on his benefactor, and perhaps bringing some old pestilence or other forgotten and long-buried evil on society; . . . and then would hasten back

to the catacomb, which, after so long haunting it, has grown his most congenial home. (33)

Just before his murder, the monk is shown hiding from the rest of the visitors on the Capitoline Hill. Here again, the words chosen to describe his position stress his subterranean nature: "in the basement wall of the palace," "shaded from the moon," and within "a deep, empty niche" (170-171).

Even Hawthorne's description of the Capitoline Hill where Donatello kills the monk is significant. First "the great height of the palace" is pointed out, then the level on which the sight-seeing party is standing, and finally the precipice below: "They all bent over, and saw that the cliff fell perpendicularly downward to about the depth, or rather more, at which the tall palace rose in height above their heads" (168). Kenyon reflects that this precipice "'symbolizes how sudden was the fall in those days from the utmost height of ambition to its profoundest ruin'" (168). His comment seems little more than a cliché; nevertheless, it points up to the reader the fact that these vertical levels have symbolic value within the novel, and are not placed there by accident. What Kenyon fails to realize in his preoccupation with past suicides and spiritual ruins is the doom which is about to befall some of those closest to him. There will not only be a literal "fall" for the monk, but also a figurative or spiritual "fall" for Miriam and Donatello: "his shriek went quivering downward. With the dead thump upon the stones below had come an unutterable horror. . . . They [Miriam and Donatello]

both leaned over the parapet, and gazed downward as earnestly as if some inestimable treasure had fallen over, and were yet recoverable. On the pavement below was a dark mass, lying in a heap, with little or nothing human in its appearance" (173).

Two further points that associate this monk with the idea of depth are seen in the visit to the church where he lies in state after his death. The music heard here is not ordinary music: "From beneath the pavement of the church came the deep, lugubrious strain of a De Profundis, which sounded like an utterance of the tomb itself, so dismally did it rumble through the burial vaults, and ooze up among the flat gravestones . . ." (182). This is the atmosphere in which the reader leaves this character in the novel: " . . . the cemetery of the Capuchins is no place to nourish celestial hopes; the soul sinks forlorn and wretched under all this burden of dusty death" (194).

Deep places receive so much attention in The Marble Faun that some further comment must be made on them--even when they do not relate to any specific character in the story. Rome itself takes on ominous, sinister aspects when these depths are discussed at length and with moral overtones: "if you go thither in melancholy mood--if you go with a ruin in your heart, or with a vacant site there, where once stood the airy fabric of happiness, now vanished--all the ponderous gloom of the Roman Past will pile itself upon that spot, and crush you down as with the heaped-up marble and granite, the earth mounds, and multi-

tudinous bricks of its material decay" (409-410). Twice at least, Rome past or present is likened to a buried corpse: "A depth of thirty feet of soil has covered up the Rome of ancient days, so that it lies like the dead corpse of a giant, decaying for centuries" (110). And again: "All over the surface of what once was Rome, it seems to be the effort of Time to bury up the ancient city, as if it were a corpse, and he the sexton" (149).

Even more ominous connotations are given in the account of Kenyon's search through the Roman streets for the lost Hilda. Here the author associates crime with the underground extreme of the vertical scale: "Beneath meaner houses there were unsuspected dungeons that had once been princely chambers, and open to the daylight; but, on account of some wickedness there perpetrated, each passing age had thrown its handful of dust upon the spot, and buried it from sight. Only ruffians knew of its existence, and kept it for murder, and worse crime" (412).

We can now examine Donatello further, against this background of depth symbolism. It was noted previously that his drastic change throughout the course of the story is reflected in his changing attitude towards height. A similar change of attitude can be witnessed in regard to depth. In the beginning, the child-man fears the underground with the natural aversion of any child who loves to play in the open air. In the end, the grown man faces the probability of deep imprisonment with newly acquired strength.

During the "Subterranean Reminiscences" in the catacombs, the young Donatello does not share his friends' strange fascination for the underground: "'I hate it all!' cried Donatello, with peculiar energy. 'Dear friends, let us hasten back into the blessed daylight!'" (25). After his spiritual fall from innocence, however, the deep places take on new significance. He still does not take pleasure in them, but he is seeking to learn something they can teach him: "It was perceptible that he had already had glimpses of strange and subtle matters in those dark caverns into which all men must descend if they would know anything beneath the surface and illusive pleasures of existence. And when they emerge, though dazzled and blinded by the first glare of daylight, they take truer and sadder views of life forever afterwards" (262). At another point, Kenyon notes the change in Donatello, in these terms: "In the black depths, the Faun had found a soul, and was struggling with it towards the light of heaven" (268).

From this moment at Donatello's estate, we see him at ground level until his imprisonment at the very end. Through nearly the last half of the book he rambles with Kenyon through the Italian countryside, or appears in the street celebrations of the Roman carnival. In fact, Kenyon is surprised to see his friend walking as a "masked penitent" through the crowded streets of Rome. Then later, Donatello is seen with Miriam dressed up for the carnival in the costume of a peasant with his contadina. This suggested participation in the common events of Italian

life is indicative of Donatello's change. He had always been a child of nature before, who had not had the desire nor the ability to mingle in such affairs of the city. The most important point to note, regarding his coming back to Rome after his crime, is that he has returned to give himself up to the proper authorities. He is no longer interested in idle escape, but in accepting the consequences of his own choices. His remorse, as Kenyon explains in the Conclusion, "'kept him lingering in the neighborhood of Rome, with the ultimate purpose of delivering himself up to justice'" (466), until he is finally arrested in one of the city's streets (450-451).

The last that is known of Donatello comes out in that significant conversation atop St. Peter's cathedral. It is neither Kenyon nor Hilda who brings up the subject of their former friend; the narrator must initiate the discussion:

"Well," resumed I, after an interval of deep consideration, "I have but few things more to ask. Where, at this moment, is Donatello?"

"The Castle of Saint Angelo," said Kenyon sadly, turning his face towards that sepulchral fortress, "is no longer a prison; but there are others which have dungeons as deep, and in one of them, I fear, lies our poor Faun." (467)

Some parallels to the character of Arthur Dimmesdale in The Scarlet Letter are in order here. While Donatello's salvation may not be as clearly stated as is Dimmesdale's, there are similarities in the final views that Hawthorne gives us of these

two men which are too important to be cast aside. Dimmesdale's descent to the level of the pillory was, for him, the arrival at his moment of truth--even though the intense pressure that built up to this event killed him. Likewise, Donatello's descent to the common level of the Roman street was, for him, the arrival at his moment of truth--even though this descent brought about his arrest and imprisonment. Although each is brought down from a higher level to be buried or imprisoned underground, each has had a brief fulfillment of true manhood; each has faced life honestly. In speaking of Donatello, Kenyon sums it up very well: "'his remorse, gnawing into his soul, has awakened it; developing a thousand high capabilities, moral and intellectual, which we never should have dreamed of asking for, within the scanty compass of the Donatello whom we knew'" (460). Much the same thing might be said of Dimmesdale.

Thus the middle ground is what Hawthorne seems to regard as the most sympathetic, admirable, and courageous position--not too high and not too low on the vertical scale. Like Hester Prynne, Miriam Schaefer in The Marble Faun occupies this mid-ground position. This is not to say, of course, that this is the easiest position to take, but Hawthorne seems to view it as the most realistic in several respects, and, therefore, the most healthy spiritually. Both Hester and Miriam have learned to accept themselves; both endure at the conclusion of their respective stories. This very survival says something about the

advantage of their position.

A typical scene in which Miriam is depicted in The Marble Faun is that in the Borghese grounds where she has spent the charming "Faun and Nymph" interlude with Donatello only to be overtaken by the sinister model. In her depression that follows, Hilda and Kenyon look down upon her from the brow of the Pincian Hill: "In the piazza below, near the foot of the magnificent steps, stood Miriam, with her eyes bent on the ground, as if she were counting those little, square, uncomfortable paving stones that make it a penitential pilgrimage to walk in Rome" (111). Throughout many such events of the story, Hilda, Kenyon, or other characters look down from similar elevations, to see Miriam walking on street level, quite often in the midst of a large crowd of people. In Chapter Eleven, for example, Hilda and Kenyon are leaning over a high wall above her: " . . . had Miriam raised her eyes, she might have seen Hilda and the sculptor leaning on the parapet. But she walked in a mist of trouble, and could distinguish little beyond its limits. . . . The Porta del Popolo swarmed with life. . . . But the stream of Miriam's trouble kept its way through this flood of human life, and neither mingled with it nor was turned aside" (98). A similar instance on the same day again emphasizes vertical relationships: "Kenyon and Hilda again let their glances fall into the piazza at their feet. They there beheld Miriam . . . " (107).

After the murder, she and Donatello begin wandering through the city aimlessly, in hopes of reconciling their new and strange

feelings, until they find themselves on a street at the far end of which stands Hilda's tower. They stop to watch her open her window and pray. Quietly, but desperately, Miriam asks that she pray for them. When Hilda instantly shuts her window instead, we are reminded, as I have suggested earlier, that she cannot bear to share in the humanity and guilt of the two down on the street (177). Later, when Miriam hopes at least to tell her friend good-bye, her laborious climb up Hilda's stairway is described in painstaking detail. Miriam starts, then stops--never quite certain if she will be accepted by her friend, whom she considers superior to herself. It is much later in that same day that Miriam finally forces herself to ascend to Hilda's level: "It was long past noon, when a step came up the staircase. It had passed beyond the limits where there was communication with the lower regions of the palace, and was mounting the successive flights which led only to Hilda's precincts" (206). As Miriam seems to have suspected, the climb is futile. She is met with cold refusal--couched in lofty terms--and shut out of Hilda's life from this point on.

An individual as strong and flexible as Miriam, however, does not despair here. Very much like Hester, Miriam takes her punishment steadfastly. She leaves Rome for a time, but she is still the same Miriam; the reader finds her again at the ground-floor level of Donatello's tower in the Apennines. While Kenyon and Donatello are climbing its battlements, they hear a beautifully haunting voice rising in song from beneath them, "far up-

ward from the abyss . . . into a higher and purer region . . . floating around the very summit of the tower" (269).

After Kenyon offers his help, Miriam and he decide to meet in the square surrounding the Bronze Pontiff in Perugia. At market day in this village, she and Donatello are brought together for their crucial meeting, in the middle of a crowd of busy people at street level.

Moreover, although Miriam presumably has an aristocratic, wealthy background, the point is strongly implied that her own choice has brought her to the streets of Rome and the dusty lanes of provincial villages. Kenyon has pondered this possibility and has likened her to a princess choosing to "alight from her gilded equipage to go on foot through a rustic lane" (397). Such a choice as this implies more strength of character on Miriam's part than if she had been merely an idle wanderer. She prefers the realities of Rome's common people to the political intrigue which seems to have typified her own family background. Here again, then, she resembles Hester, who seems to have left her more genteel life in England, at least partly in hopes of finding an independent way of life.

Ironically, much like Hester's, Miriam's "freedom" is granted her only under certain conditions: "'Free and self-controlled as she appeared, her every movement was watched and investigated far more thoroughly by the priestly rulers than by her dearest friends'" (465). Much of her life seems to be manipulated by those in power. In Hester's case it was the Puritan

rulers; in Miriam's case it is the Papal rulers. In both cases, however, the honest and warm spirit of these women cannot be conquered; both seem to be on a quest for truth, no matter where the quest might take them. For both women, also, a major portion of their sorrow comes from that doom they see inflicted upon their lovers.

Finally, these resemblances in turn may suggest that Hawthorne has similar reasons for leaving these two women with unabated strength, warmth, and dignity at the end of each tale. Perhaps one of these reasons at least can be found in their steadfast willingness to accept the middle ground--without attaching any false value to the pseudo-superiority of the high places, and without taking easy refuge in the depths of sin and morbidity.

Notes

I

¹ Nathaniel Hawthorne, "Sights From A Steeple," in Twice Told Tales And Other Short Stories (New York: Washington Square Press, 1960), p. 142. Hereafter only page numbers will be cited parenthetically within the text.

II

² Nathaniel Hawthorne, The Scarlet Letter, A Romance, rpt. of the text of The Centenary Edition of The Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne, Ohio State Univ. (1962), (Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill, 1969), p. 60. Hereafter only page numbers will be cited parenthetically within the text.

III

³ Nathaniel Hawthorne, The Marble Faun: Or The Romance of Monte Beni, William Charvat, et al. The Centenary Edition of The Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne, IV (Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 1968), pp. 51-52. Hereafter only page numbers will be cited parenthetically within the text.

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ALTITUDE AS ATTITUDE
IN TWO NOVELS OF HAWTHORNE

by

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AN ABSTRACT OF A MASTER'S REPORT

submitted in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of English

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

1973

Nathaniel Hawthorne uses altitude as a symbolic device to illustrate character attitudes in much of his writing. The narrator of "Sights From A Steeple" climbs high enough to gain a new perspective on people and places, but he also realizes that it is possible to climb too high and stay too long.

In The Scarlet Letter the Puritan leaders illustrate the high position--both in their attitudes and in the details of the buildings they occupy. Dimmesdale is painfully aware of his superior stance. He demonstrates this when he descends from his upstairs apartment to seek the relief of the pillory, and again when he descends from his pulpit to make confession at the pillory.

The crowd standing in the street, looking up at Hester on the scaffold, illustrates the position of moral and emotional baseness. Chillingworth, whom we associate most with this lowest position, bends toward the ground; we find him stooping even closer to the earth after his seven years of revenge. At times he appears satanic, as though rising from infernal regions below.

In the middle between these extremes stands Hester on the scaffold of the pillory, which rises above the level of the street but remains beneath the judges' balcony and the ministers' pulpit. She "sees" the meaning of her life from this vantage point; here she also summons forth her courage and honesty. Significantly, it is Hester who survives to the end of the story. Dimmesdale, in his final moments, achieves spiritual salvation only by descending to the level of the pillory.

In The Marble Faun the extremes are broader in physical scope. Towers and mountains emphasize superior attitudes, while catacombs, graveyards, and dungeons emphasize "low" or morbid attitudes. The middle between these extremes exists at ground level.

Hilda, in her tower high above Rome, is the most aloof. Her merciless attitude exhibits itself many times until the last scene when she is standing atop St. Peter's cathedral--safely above the imperfections of fellow humans. Donatello's tower in the more natural setting of the country becomes a symbol of fear and isolation only after his "fall" from innocence. Then he flees to the highest battlements where he is seized with vertigo and further guilt feelings. Later we see him descending to ground level as he learns to accept himself and take responsibility for his actions. Kenyon's upstairs studio shows his original aloofness, but he goes through a period of re-evaluation--striving to come down to greater reality during his friends' suffering and his own search for Hilda. When Hilda rejects his new ideas, however, he immediately returns to his former position of aloofness to satisfy her.

The monk illustrates the extreme depths--in his emergence from the catacombs, his plunge over the precipice, and his eerie burial with the chant rising from beneath the church floor. Rome itself takes on the aspect of an evil character because of its subterranean network of dungeons and buried ruins. Donatello, however, is the most tragic figure to illustrate the depths as

he descends to one of these dungeons a prisoner.

The mid-point between these extremes in The Marble Faun is street level. It is here that Donatello comes to confess his crime, though it costs him his freedom. He resembles Dimmesdale in this one moment of truth, a triumph in itself, but unfortunately too brief. Miriam moves at ground level throughout the entire story: in her encounters in the Borghese gardens, her lonely suffering amidst the crowds, her sad vigil beneath Donatello's tower, and her accompaniment with him to the Roman carnival where she helplessly watches his arrest. As does Hester, Miriam survives the greater tragedies. Hawthorne surely had reasons for saving these two women, who managed to remain steadfast between the extremes--attaching no false value to height, nor taking easy refuge in morbid depths.